

The Woman's College of  
The University of North Carolina  
LIBRARY



CQ  
no. 565

COLLEGE COLLECTION

Gift of  
Christopher Michael Smith

SMITH, CHRISTOPHER MICHAEL. Carson McCullers' The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter: Isolation and Self-Fulfillment. (1968)  
Directed by: Dr. Robert O. Stephens. pp. 63

In this paper, I approach Mrs. McCullers' The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter through a close reading of the text. One can consider the novel as social commentary, as representative of the rather loose genre of Southern gothic writing, or as an expression of psychological or theological theory; but I contend that the novel has a carefully worked out structural and thematic form which allows one to discuss the book on its own terms with the need of no other "tools" of criticism than a careful eye for the techniques used by the author.

Mrs. McCullers uses Mick Kelly to establish the basic division of objective and subjective worlds and Biff Brannon to focus the reader on this division as found in the other characters. Realizing the position of these two characters and the importance of the conflict they delineate, I reached the following conclusions: (1) Mick Kelly is the central character rather than John Singer or Spiros Antonapoulos; (2) Singer, Antonapoulos, Copeland, and Blount are all selfish and seek self-fulfillment rather than communication; (3) Mrs. McCullers' description of her novel as "an ironic parable of fascism" is appropriate and revealing; (4) the multiplicity of religious symbols serves to emphasize that each character yearns to be a god within his own dream world;

12

and (5) the novel ends optimistically because the two pivotal figures, Mick Kelly and Biff Brannon, survive the conflict of objective and subjective worlds, a conflict to which the others succumb.

by  
Christopher Michael Smith

A Thesis Submitted to  
The Faculty of the Graduate School at  
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

Greensboro  
April, 1968

Approved by

*Robert H. Stephens*  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Thesis Advisor

CARSON McCULLERS' THE HEART IS A LONELY HUNTER:

ISOLATION AND SELF-FULFILLMENT

by

Christopher Michael Smith

A Thesis Submitted to  
the Faculty of the Graduate School at  
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

Greensboro  
April, 1968

Approved by

*Robert O. Stephens*

Thesis Adviser



APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis has been approved by the following  
committee of the Faculty of the Graduate School at The  
University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Thesis Adviser

Robert H. Stephens

Oral Examination  
Committee Members

Joseph R. Millard

Donald G. Darnell

Converse D. Clouse

April 29, 1968

Date of Examination

# CHAPTER I

## ISOLATION, SELF-FULFILLMENT, AND SUBJECTIVE

### SUBJECTIVE

### TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. ISOLATION, SELF-FULFILLMENT, AND SUBJECTIVE AND OBJECTIVE WORLDS . . . . .	1
II. MICK KELLY AND THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN SUBJECTIVE AND OBJECTIVE WORLDS . . . . .	10
III. BLOUNT, COPELAND, AND THE "IRONIC PARABLE OF FASCISM" . . . . .	24
IV. SINGER AND ANTONAPOULOS AS GOD-FIGURES . . . . .	38
V. BIFF BRANNON, QUESTIONER . . . . .	48
VI. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS . . . . .	58
BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .	61

informing the "eccentric design" of her fiction. He explains that this opposition springs from a certain sort of subjectivism, an introversion which "is a result of the disjunction between self and the world which contemporary life has magnified."<sup>2</sup> In making his discussion on the basic opposition in Mrs. McAllister's fiction, Mr. Hansen

<sup>2</sup>That Hansen, "Charles McAllister: The Ascent of Love and Pain," in *Radical Language: Studies in the Contemporary American Novel* (Princeton, 1961), pp. 203-204.

## CHAPTER I

### ISOLATION, SELF-FULFILLMENT, AND SUBJECTIVE AND OBJECTIVE WORLDS

Carson McCullers' first novel, The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter, is long and complex, but the multiplicity of themes, symbols, characters, and motifs are all united in the central theme of isolation which appears to result from unfulfilled attempts at communication. This isolation is occasioned and informed by the fundamental dual nature of Mrs. McCullers' world, which is clearly divided into objective and subjective realities. This division is suggested by Ihab Hassan in Radical Innocence. His remarks in his chapter "Carson McCullers: The Aesthetics of Love and Pain" center on the underlying "opposition" informing the "eccentric design" of her fiction. He explains that this opposition springs from a certain sort of subjectivism, an introversion which "is a result of the disjunction between self and the world which contemporary life has magnified."<sup>1</sup> In basing his discussion on the basic opposition in Mrs. McCullers' fiction, Mr. Hassan

---

<sup>1</sup>Ihab Hassan, "Carson McCullers: The Aesthetics of Love and Pain," in Radical Innocence: Studies in the Contemporary American Novel (Princeton, 1961), pp. 205, 208.

is echoing an idea suggested nearly ten years earlier by Oliver Evans in the first critical essay devoted entirely to Mrs. McCullers' work. Mr. Evans emphasizes what he calls the "spiritual isolation" which is the underlying and unifying theme of all Mrs. McCullers' fiction. As Mr. Evans states:

Mrs. McCullers has herself used the phrase moral isolation to describe this universal condition of mankind (Theatre Arts Monthly, April 1950). Spiritual isolation, however, is probably a better term, as the moral implications of the condition are by no means the only ones. Every individual, she believes, is imprisoned in the cell of his own being, and any practical attempt at communication, such as speech, is doomed to failure. . . . The only force which does not make for spiritual isolation is love, or ideal communication. Love is the machinery by which men strive to escape from their cells . . . .<sup>2</sup>

Behind Mrs. Evans' comments lies the assumption of an opposition similar to that made explicit by Mr. Hassan. Mr. Evans, too, sees a disjunction between what he calls the character's "cell of his own being" and the outside world. Both critics see the individual in Mrs. McCullers' fictional world as isolated within his own subjective self; he is unable, or at least finds it very difficult, to achieve any true communication or identification with those outside his own cell of being.

The characters in the novel are isolated by a

---

<sup>2</sup>Oliver Evans, "Spiritual Isolation in Carson McCullers," New World Writing, I (April 1952), 298.



variety of different causes. Singer, for example, is isolated from others by his physical handicap. Jake Blount is set apart by his radical political and social ideology. Dr. Copeland is separated from the white society by his color and from his own people by his education and progressive ideas. And Mick is set apart by both her age and the artistic flame that burns within her. These isolating factors are quite obvious, and various critics have been quick to recognize both the apparent causes and the resulting condition of mutual isolation surrounding all the characters. Mr. Frank Durham perhaps best sums up the consensus concerning the relationship of characters and theme in Mrs. McCullers' first novel:

Most see the theme as that of human loneliness and the individual's attempts to break the barriers separating him from other human souls. This is certainly the major theme of the novel and of the corpus of Mrs. McCullers' work.<sup>3</sup>

But even though most critics are quick to recognize the basic theme in Mrs. McCullers' work, most fail to pay due consideration to what lies behind the theme, and thus they draw faulty conclusions about various aspects of her novels. Perhaps the very obviousness of the theme of isolation may be something of a trap for those who attempt to understand this strange fictional world. I suggest

---

<sup>3</sup>Frank Durham, "God and No God in The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter," South Atlantic Quarterly, LVI (Autumn 1957), 494.

that, even though the central theme of The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter may be isolation, this theme is not related to "the individual's attempts to break through the barriers separating him from other human souls," as Mr. Durham phrases it. The opposite is true. Mrs. McCullers' characters do not try to communicate, and the understanding of this is necessary for any accurate interpretation of her work.

Even so, some critics insist on referring to such things as Mrs. McCullers' "compassion for every attempt of the human being to become a we instead of an I,"<sup>4</sup> though there are few examples of such efforts at communication in any of the author's work. John Vickery, for example, suggests that:

Moved by his desire to break out of his isolation, to communicate and share his thoughts and experience, to become part of another person, a group, or the world, the lover finds only a new and more intense loneliness.<sup>5</sup>

And even Mr. Evans fails to follow to logical conclusions his descriptions of the fundamental dual nature of this strange fictional world. While he implies a basic division of subjective and objective worlds which leads to isolation,

---

<sup>4</sup>Louise Y. Gossett, "Dispossessed Love: Carson McCullers," in Violence in Recent Southern Fiction (Durham, N.C., 1965), p. 159.

<sup>5</sup>John B. Vickery, "Carson McCullers: A Map of Love," Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature, I (1960), 14.

he still assumes that the characters try to bridge the gaps between these worlds and among one another. Mr. Evans' logic is illustrated by the following quotation from his book The Ballad of Carson McCullers:

At is [sic] broadest level of meaning, however, the allegory of The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter . . . concerns the struggle of individuals to free themselves from the cells of their being--to achieve communication with other individuals similarly imprisoned and to identify themselves in some way with something bigger than and outside themselves.<sup>6</sup>

Mr. Evans seems to be saying that since the characters are clearly isolated within their own "cells of being," they must, quite logically, be seeking "release in love from the bondage of self . . . ." <sup>7</sup> Indeed, this reasoning does seem logical enough in terms of our own, everyday world in which communication is the opposite of and cure for isolation. But Mrs. McCullers' fictional world is not logical in quite that way. Communication is not attempted and does not even seem to be a possibility. This is not to say, however, that these characters seek nothing, but rather that what they seek is totally within themselves. Cut off from other people, isolated as they are, not physically but "spiritually" or "morally," however, they seek fulfillment within their own inner worlds.

---

<sup>6</sup> Oliver Evans, The Ballad of Carson McCullers: A Biography (New York, 1966), p. 43.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 45.



Mr. Evans concludes his sentence by stating that these characters "seek release in love from the bondage of self, but, since it is 'natural' for most men to think and act selfishly, their capacity for love is limited." Certainly the characters in The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter act selfishly, even more so, I think, than is "natural"; and the capacity for love is not just limited but non-existent in any generally accepted sense. The passage most critics point to with respect to the selfishness of the various characters and their basic inability to communicate with one another occurs when four of the five major characters accidentally meet in Singer's room and find themselves totally unable to converse. As Horace Taylor puts it:

What is revealed in the incident is the unconscious but utter selfishness of these people. Each of them is solely concerned with the pouring out of his own inner compulsions to Singer.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, Singer, as we have noticed, understands little if any of the "out-pourings" with which he is afflicted. Careful consideration of this passage yields two particularly important points: (1) the characters do not attempt to communicate with one another, and (2) they do not even try to communicate with Singer as

---

<sup>8</sup>Horace Taylor, "The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter: A Southern Waste Land," in Studies in American Literature, ed. Waldo McNeir and Leo B. Levy (Baton Rouge, 1960), p. 157.



they appear to do at earlier points in the book when they are alone with him. In this scene the four characters are together at the same time, and the outcome of the meeting is indeed revealing. Singer is unable to understand what is wrong; he thinks:

Always each of them had so much to say. Yet now that they were together they were silent. When they came in he had expected . . . this to be the end of something. But in the room there was only a feeling of strain.<sup>9</sup>

A few lines later the following description is provided:

"Each person addressed his words mainly to the mute. Their thoughts seemed to converge in him as the spokes of a wheel to the center hub." (180)

These lines have been referred to by several critics to illustrate Singer's central position in the structure of the novel as well as the selfishness of the characters, and indeed both aspects of character and structure are closely related. The characters do seem drawn toward Singer, and it is thus possible to assume he is the major character in the novel. At the same time, the question of just why these characters are so attracted to Singer is raised, for it is precisely this attraction that has apparently led some critics to assume that Copeland, Blount, Mick Kelly, and Biff Brannon seek communication

---

<sup>9</sup>Carson McCullers, The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter (New York, 1961), p. 179. [All other quotations cited in text.]

or something beyond themselves. This puzzle can be resolved, however, for the characters are not really attracted to Singer as a person but only as reflections of themselves. As John Vickery puts it, the characters are drawn to Singer "unaware that what they see imaged in the deaf-mute is their own alter-ego, their own perfected and fulfilled self."<sup>10</sup> They use Singer as "a private wailing wall"<sup>11</sup> through which they can find release but not communication; they can achieve some illusion of self-fulfillment through Singer, but they cannot, and do not try to, break from their isolation.

The interpretations provided by John Vickery, Hugo McPherson, and others open doors to an alternate approach to the novel--an approach that recognizes that whatever isolation may be evident is not resultant from frustrated efforts at communication. Horace Taylor, for example, asserts that "Singer is an illusion . . . that each of the characters creates to satisfy his own desperate emotional needs."<sup>12</sup> Taking this line of interpretation as a starting point, Klaus Lubbers goes so far as to state that the theme of The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter is not isolation at all. "The main theme . . . is not the social

---

<sup>10</sup>Vickery, p. 16.

<sup>11</sup>Hugo McPherson, "Carson McCullers: Lonely Huntress," Tamarack Review, No. 11 (Spring 1959), 33.

<sup>12</sup>Taylor, p. 155.

problem nor is it primarily that of human isolation. It is rather the question of truth and illusion (or disillusionment)."<sup>13</sup> The conflict of illusion and reality corresponds directly with the conflict of subjective and objective worlds. The characters do seek to create subjective dream worlds of illusion rather than true inter-relationships in the objective, everyday world. This basic conflict which underlies all the action in the novel is illustrated best by Mick Kelly's progression from dream world to harsh reality--a progression that seems sad and pessimistic to some critics but which, I think, indicates the admirable strength and vitality of her character. Mick is the only character to experience fully this dream world and yet escape from it.

---

<sup>13</sup>Klaus Lubbers, "The Necessary Order: A Study of Theme and Structure in Carson McCullers' Fiction," Jahrbuch für Amerikastudien, VIII (1963), 191.



## CHAPTER II

### MICK KELLY AND THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN SUBJECTIVE AND OBJECTIVE WORLDS

The distinction between subjective and objective worlds is more than verbal acrobatics and more than just an attempt to set up some theoretical basis upon which to approach the novel. Although the actual terms "subjective" and "objective" are not used by Mrs. McCullers, she is very explicit about the duality of her fictional world. She metaphorically refers to this duality through Mick Kelly's "inside" and "outside" rooms. Mick is used throughout the novel to contrast with the other characters and to underscore the major themes. In this sense, in fact, Mick Kelly can be seen as the central character in the novel, both in terms of structure and theme, rather than John Singer. Early in the book she is continually concerned with having her own separate room so that she may have some privacy from her family and the boarders. Later in the novel the significance of this desire for a private room is suggested. Suddenly, in the middle of a conversation with her younger brother, Mick retreats into her subjective dream world:

She sat down on the steps and laid her head on her knees. She went into the inside room.



With her it was like there was two places--the inside room and the outside room. School and the family and the things that happened every day were in the outside room. Mister Singer was in both rooms. Foreign countries and plans and music were in the inside room. The songs she thought about were there. And the symphony. When she was by herself in this inside room the music she heard that night after the party would come back to her. This symphony grew slow like a big flower in her mind. During the day sometimes, or when she had just waked up in the morning, a new part of the symphony would suddenly come to her. Then she would have to go into the inside room and listen to it many times and try to join it into the parts of the symphony she remembered. The inside room was a very private place. She could be in the middle of a house full of people and still feel like she was locked up by herself. (138-39)

The passage is long, but the specific wording deserves attention. The outside room for Mick is comprised of everyday people, things, and events. She herself is part of this objective landscape, but she is also set apart from the external world by her potential to enter her "inside room," or subjective world, which contains her dreams for the future and her creative identification with music. She is in both worlds simultaneously; consequently, she can be with other people and yet feel "locked up by herself" in her own inner world. In this sense, she can be alone in a crowd. It is significant that Singer, like Mick, can be simultaneously in both the objective world and her subjective world.

The tension between these two worlds provides the central conflict for Mick, and Mrs. McCullers has used

this conflict within the adolescent, somewhat impertinent yet very sensitive tomboy to emphasize the same conflict which, with some variations, drives all the other major characters. An indication of this inter-relationship is suggested when Mick is described as imagining herself together with famous people ice-skating in her dream world. Singer is with her, and when he falls through the ice, she saves him "without regard for peril." (83) Thus she fancifully sees herself as a savior much the same as do other characters in the novel, and this role is dependent on the division between these two worlds symbolically suggested early in the novel as Mick perches on the peak of a house under construction. High above the everyday world, she enters her "inner room." Standing on the roof, Mick feels exhilarated and thinks, "There was something about getting to the very top that gave you a wild feeling and made you want to yell or sing or raise up your arms and fly." (28) This feeling of abandon leads her into her personal "inner room" of thoughts, and at the same time she is led to question her own identity, though of course she does not realize the import of her thoughts. She thinks of her initials, M. K., which she plans some day to have written on the door of her Packard automobile, embroidered in red on her handkerchiefs and underwear, and so on. After climbing down from the roof, she enters the empty house and writes the names of famous

people on the walls together with her own initials.

It is significant that these various elements are all bound up together in one important scene. In Mick's "inside room," her subjective world, are her ideas about music as well as her fanciful, child-like dreams of being famous and her sub-conscious concern with her own identity; in turn, these dreams and thoughts are associated with the construction of the empty house, which foreshadows the later sealing-off of Mick's subjective world. The construction of the house is nearing completion, at which time the "carpenters would leave and the kids would have to find another place to play." (28) A little later Mick thinks, "But no matter how many Keep Out signs were put up, they couldn't run kids away until the house had been painted and finished and people had moved in." (30-31) When the people move in, the house, too, will become a part of the objective, everyday world, and Mick will not be able to escape there by herself. While the house is empty, Mick can make of it what she will--and do the same with herself, too.

A sequence of descriptions later in the novel also illustrates quite clearly the contrast in Mick's life between inner and outer worlds and the direct correspondence of this contrast to the conflict between youth and adulthood which she experiences. Mick is an adolescent caught between these two worlds just as



she is caught in and vacillates between inner and outer worlds. This conflict comes into focus when Mick gives her first "adult" party. She dresses in a manner appropriate to the occasion, if not quite appropriate to her youth and her boyish personality--"somebody different from Mick Kelly entirely." (91) She goes for a walk around the block with Harry Minowitz, only to find, upon returning, the party disrupted by younger, uninvited children who "bellowed and ran and mixed with the invited people--in their old loose-legged knickers and everyday clothes." (96) Mick is caught in the swirl; unable to keep up her adult façade, she jumps in a muddy ditch. Finally, after returning home, she yells to her guests, "Everybody go home! The door is shut! The party is over!" The episode of the party is a crushing blow to Mick's illusion of self-importance represented in the earlier scene at the construction site, for Mick is revealed as being just her young, tomboy self despite how she dresses and how she tries to picture herself. Mick's inner world does not crumble yet, but its demise is once again foreshadowed.

Before the party, when she is dressed up like an adult, Mick feels like someone other than herself, but later she enters her subjective world and seems to experience a moment of self-identity. She leaves the house, walks about the neighborhood, and stops at a house she has visited before where the residents play



the radio. Sitting outside on the grass, she thinks "what a very fine and secret place it is." (99) When the music starts on the radio, she withdraws into her inner world and wonders:

How did it come? For a minute the opening balanced from one side to the other. Like a walk or march. Like God strutting in the night. The outside of her was suddenly froze and only that first part of the music was hot inside her heart. She could not even hear what sounded after, but she sat there waiting and froze, with her fists tight. After a while the music came again, harder and loud. It didn't have anything to do with God. This was her, Mick Kelly, walking in the daytime and by herself at night. In the hot sun and in the dark with all the plans and feelings. This music was her--the real plain her. (100)

This passage is significant beyond the simple beauty of the description. Compared to the earlier scene when Mick is perched on the roof of the new house, this passage seems much stronger and more meaningful. What is described is not just a fanciful kid scribbling initials and names on walls and dreaming of future fame and fortune. Instead the reader catches Mick at a rare moment of epiphany--a moment when she feels a sudden identity with everything around her. The wording of the description indicates that the opposing forces of youth and maturity are suddenly brought together, at least in Mick's own mind. Like the music, she seems "balanced from one side to the other." She feels both her daytime everyday self and her nighttime "inner-room" self united through music into "her--the real

plain her." Whether this momentary balance of conflicting forces is really an illusion in Mick's own mind or whether this moment of identity is as valid as the precise description leads one to feel, the final outcome is the same. Even if Mick does find herself, she is, as an adolescent, changing, and so she must keep re-finding herself as she progresses. She succeeds, it seems, in finding her real self once again, at the end of the novel, but it is a different self in much less poetic circumstances.

The problems of the everyday world increase for Mick, but she is still able to escape into her inside world. When her parents become poorer, she no longer gets lunch money and has to stop her music lessons; but she still is able to find some escape for herself for she thinks that "this was in the outside room. It had nothing to do with music and foreign countries and the plans she made." (204) Mr. Singer, with whom she feels she shares a secret, is also in this dream world. She thinks that now "there was this secret feeling between them. She talked to him more than she had ever talked to a person before" because although "the other people had been ordinary, Mr. Singer was not." (207) She makes the man of mystery into a part of her dream world, as do Jake Blount, Dr. Copeland, and others. She imagines him with her "in a foreign house where in the winter it would snow." (207) Through all this her schizophrenic life seems to polarize

more and more and move toward some climactic moment. The pressures of the outside world become stronger, but so does Mick's ability to retreat into her own private world.

The moment of crisis finally occurs, not with Singer's suicide, as some critics suggest, but through sexual initiation. Mick becomes friendly with Harry Minowitz, a boy in the neighborhood, and they talk together about Fascism; they push and play around like children, but some time later Mick takes a more serious interest as she thinks that "it was true that he had grown to be a very good-looking fellow." (220) They decide to go swimming together one Sunday, and what begins as a picnic ends with sexual relations. Afterwards, on the way home, they try to understand what has happened, and Mick asks Harry if he can see any difference in her eyes; he nods affirmatively. Mick does feel herself to be different. "She felt very old, and it was like something was heavy inside her. She was a grown person now, whether she wanted to be or not." (236)

Mrs. McCullers thus goes to considerable trouble to indicate the importance of this turning-point in Mick's life, though some critics, failing to take proper account of Mick's central importance in the novel, seem to miss the significance of this sequence of events. The importance is beyond that of ordinary sexual initiation, for it is this moment that breaks her limbo suspension between



adulthood and childhood. After her encounter with Harry (and still before Singer's death), she begins to reject her inside room and finds that she must be around other people all the time. She occupies her thoughts not with plans and music as she did before but by turning to objective things like numbers and figuring, and "the numbers mixed themselves up in her brain. And the snow and the foreign land were a long, long time away." (262) The deterioration of Mick's subjective world is portrayed symbolically as Mick lies in bed afraid during the nighttime--a time she had in the past embraced and associated with her inner world. She feels claustrophobic and wonders:

How would it be if the house fell apart. Once her Dad had said the whole place ought to be condemned. Did he mean that maybe some night when they were asleep the walls would crack and the house collapse? Bury them under all the plaster and broken glass and smashed furniture? So that they could not move or breathe? (267)

Mick's thoughts in this passage call the reader's attention to the earlier description in which the house under construction is associated with Mick's dream world of plans and music, and the contrast between Mick's youthful enthusiasm and swagger in the first passage and her fears in the second is striking. At the same time that her inner world is falling apart, Mick begins to feel a need for some sort of relationship beyond herself because "at



night she was by herself in the dark and figuring was not enough. She wanted somebody." (267) She feels a need to talk to Singer rather than just imagine him in her dream world. She begins to follow him around, hoping that he will "let her understand" something even if he cannot talk to her. Singer, who is earlier described as being both in her inside and outside worlds, now becomes the person Mick clings to as her inner world falls away.

Her initiation into the objective world is completed when she decides to take a job at the local five-and-dime in order to help support the family. She understands that she will be trapped into working in the store indefinitely rather than just for the summer, as she at first tries to pretend, but she still volunteers to work. It is as though the decision has already been made for her--as though once sealed off from her nighttime dream world of music and plans she is committed entirely to the everyday world of work and responsibility, for that, it seems, is all there is left. She thinks to herself, "That was the way things were." (272) The irrevocability of her position is symbolically emphasized before Singer commits suicide. She waits on the porch to tell Singer that she is taking the job, but when he does not show up, she becomes afraid of the dark once again and runs home. The inner world not only is walled off from her but also, it appears, she

is afraid of this inner room she used to treasure so much.

The most explicit statement of Mick's final position in the everyday world is contained in the next-to-last chapter of the novel. She finds herself unable to believe two things: that Singer is dead and that she is grown up and working. Though she may have trouble finding some meaning for these two facts, she is, in truth, able to accept them rather stoically. She is the one to discover Singer's blood-stained body. She is the one who continues to work each day, to sleep at night "like she was supposed to," to count her pennies, worry about the run in her stocking, wear earrings, and generally concern herself with very ordinary, everyday problems. She is revealed as a very different person from the Mick Kelly of a year ago. The final realization of this change which has been gradually taking place is spelled out in relation to subjective and objective worlds in one very explicit paragraph. As Mick sits in the New York Café eating ice cream and drinking a nickel beer, she briefly puzzles over the problem:

But no music was in her mind. That was a funny thing. It was like she was shut out from the inside room [*italics mine*]. Sometimes a quick little tune would come and go--but she never went into the inside room with music like she used to do. . . . When she used to come home from school she felt good and was ready to start working on the music. But now she was tired. At home she just ate supper and slept and then ate breakfast and went off to

the store again. A song she had started in her private notebook two months before was still not finished. And she wanted to stay in the inside room but she didn't know how. It was like the inside room was locked somewhere away from her. A very hard thing to understand. (301)

The fact is that Mick does not fully understand. She thinks that the reason there is no music or inner world for her is that she is simply too tired. But it is clear to the reader that more is involved. After all, the "inner room" is sealed off from Mick before she ever takes the job at Woolworth's. In fact, this movement from inner to outer worlds dates from her sexual initiation that afternoon in the country. But it is difficult to take this sexual experience as the sole cause of the sealing-off of Mick's dream world; instead, this event is simply a turning point in the larger process that dominates all of Mick's story--a process of movement from childhood to adulthood, from inner to outer worlds. She takes a first tentative step into this outer world the night of her party, and throughout the rest of the novel she progresses further until she realizes that she cannot turn back.

The reader may remain puzzled, as does Mick, at the end of the novel. She does not seem to have achieved much of a victory, particularly when one considers that the inner room from which she is eventually barred contains her music--something more significant than idle dreams and fancies. One may recall, too, that night after the



party when Mick sits in the yard outside a neighbor's house and reaches a moment of epiphany while listening to the music over the radio. What happens to "the real plain her" Mick Kelly? Indeed, if there is any ideal balance between worlds, this scene represents it.

This ideal is achieved for only a moment and then lost forever, and this would be a grave tragedy if the force of this realization were not mitigated by a certain admiration for Mick's pluck at the end of the book. Life may not be very sympathetic or appealing, but there is nothing to do but face it, the author seems to suggest. Better to have the courage to thrust oneself wholly into the everyday world than to try to cling to a past dream world that is, after all, an illusion. Mick's muted acceptance of these conditions is indicated by the frequently recurring phrase "O.K." in the latter part of the novel. Mick wants Singer to tell her that her new job at Woolworth's sounds "O.K." She goes to the café after work so "she might feel O.K." and then eats a sundae that "was O.K., covered all over with chocolate and nuts and cherries." And finally she thinks, even though she feels somehow cheated, that things might

. . . turn out O.K. Maybe she would get a chance soon. Else what the hell good had it all been--the way she felt about music and the plans she had made in the inside room? It had to be some good if anything made sense.  
(302)

She concludes that it was all "some good."

The reader may be able to accept Mick's story on its own terms, but he may rightly wonder what relationship these events have to the rest of the novel. The relationship is, in fact, very close, and the importance of Mick's progression, stage by stage, from subjective to objective world, has been generally underestimated. Mick's story not only establishes the basic conflict of inner and outer worlds--a conflict of illusion and reality, ultimately, as Klaus Lubbers suggests--but it also sets the pattern of progression from one world to another. It is precisely this progression that three of the other four major characters try to reverse. If Mick successfully reconciles herself to the everyday world, Jake Blount, John Singer, and Dr. Copeland do not. All three try to progress backward out of the everyday world and into a subjective world of illusion which corresponds to Mick's inner room. Mick, then, establishes the normal course of development against which the abnormal and self-deceiving characters can be evaluated. And Mick Kelly herself is an answer to those critics who find Mrs. McCullers' fictional world too dark, Gothic, and freakish.

### CHAPTER III

#### BLOUNT, COPELAND, AND THE "IRONIC PARABLE OF FASCISM"

Mick's story provides a key to the puzzle of why Jake Blount and Dr. Copeland are drawn to Singer. Both of these social activists could find others to talk to, and indeed they do, though with little practical result; yet they turn to Singer, who cannot hear and cannot talk. Blount, the Marxist agitator, turns to Singer who is so passively sympathetic as to seem anything but a potential revolutionist. Dr. Copeland, a Negro who has been exposed to the intolerance and brutality of white society, finds understanding not among his own people but with John Singer. It is not just Singer's handicap, then, that makes him an unlikely source of attraction for Copeland and Blount, and there is a profound sense of irony surrounding these characters--an irony that becomes apparent early in the novel when Blount buttonholes Singer in the New York Café and pours out a string of drunken monologues to the mute. Not knowing that Singer is deaf, Jake says to him, "You're the only one in this town who catches what I mean. . . . I know you understand the things I want to mean." (19) It is not until the next afternoon when he wakes in Singer's apartment that Jake learns of Singer's handicap. Later,



after he has located a job, he sits down by the side of the street and starts speaking aloud to himself. He thinks that this is "good talk," and the sound of his own voice gives him "pleasure." Then suddenly he feels an urge to return to Singer's room and tell his thoughts. He thinks, "It was a queer thing to want to talk with a deaf-mute. But he was lonesome." (55) He does return to Singer's room to talk, however, and the subject of his comments turns to precisely his own inability to get his ideas across to other people. He feels he has the answer to the social evils of society through his Marxist ideology. He is convinced he is one of the few people who has the solution. As he states in the earlier scene at the café, "I'm one who knows. I'm a stranger in a strange land"; and then to Singer, "There are those of us who know and those who don't know. . . . when us people who know run into each other that's an event. It almost never happens." (19) Thus he immediately includes Singer with himself as the "knows" set in opposition to, and evidently isolated from, the mass of "don't knows." Like Mick, then, Jake thinks he shares a sort of secret with Singer, who really knows nothing about what is going on. The isolation apparent in Jake's arbitrary division of people becomes clearer in the later scene when he asks what one can do when he "can't make the others understand." The others, the great mass of people, he refers to as "blind, dumb,

and blunt-headed--stupid and mean." (59)

The irony of Jake's apparent efforts to communicate with Singer is underscored by Jake's inclusion of him in the "knows" as opposed to the "dumb" other people. Singer, though he can read lips, understands little of Jake's slurred speech, as is revealed in one of the mute's letters to his friend Antonapoulos. He writes that Jake sometimes "speaks such a crazy language that I cannot follow. . . . He thinks he and I have a secret together but I do not know what it is." (183) Yet it is necessary to understand more than simply this surface irony in order to appreciate the complexities of Jake's attraction to Singer. Mrs. McCullers goes to some trouble to show the reader that Jake himself realizes that talking with Singer is "a queer thing." Even after Jake realizes Singer's handicap, he still talks to him. In fact, when Jake first starts speaking to Singer in the café, he seems to be just latching on to the only person who will sit still for him; and one senses that any person would serve Jake equally well. It is only after Jake learns that Singer is deaf and dumb that his real attraction starts to develop. Like Mick's gradual progression from subjective world to objective world, Jake's attraction to Singer and his closely related withdrawal into his subjective world is a slowly vegetating thing. Gradually he finds himself pulled into himself, and just as Mick's development is

keyed to certain more or less external events and specific turning points, so is Jake's regression. One suspects that it is in answer to the frustrations of the everyday world that Blount creates his illusory world of pseudo-communication with Singer. Knowing that Singer cannot hear and cannot speak, Jake is thus free to make of him what he will. It is not surprising that he makes Singer into an understanding person--one of the "knows"--because that is what Jake needs most and because that is the way he sees himself.

As Jake Blount moves away from the objective world, the irony of his position grows. In one important scene, for example, he fervently explains to Singer his insights into society:

But say a man does know. He sees the world as it is and he looks back thousands of years to see how it all come about. . . . But the main thing he sees is that the whole system of the world is built on a lie. And although it's as plain as the shining sun--the don't-knows have lived with that lie so long they just can't see it. (131)

At this point, of course, Jake himself has already begun to live a lie; he is himself striking off into his inner world of illusion, using Singer as the object of this effort at some sort of self-fulfillment in his personal dream world. Jake becomes more and more alienated from people as he becomes more attracted to Singer. He gets drunk at one point later in the novel and bellows into



the darkened street, "You dumb dumb dumb dumb bastards. You dumb dumb dumb dumb--" (244) After challenging everybody within hearing to a fight, he runs to Singer's room and falls down on the floor to sleep. He seems completely at odds with those people he says he wishes to save, and he symbolically retreats to his dream world when he seeks out Singer's room as a place of refuge. The final turning point in the dual process of alienation and growing illusion occurs when Jake Blount meets with one of the "knows" who, in fact, does share the same general understanding of society. Jake and Dr. Copeland end up by rejecting each other, however, and for Jake this represents the complete loss of any possibility for communication in the objective world. He is too tied up in his own mind, his own subjective world, to try seriously or even to want to communicate. When toward the end of the book violence and hatred break loose at the carnival where Jake works, it is not surprising that he joins in the fight, swinging wildly, not seeing whom he hits, and with "senseless words" spinning in his mind. It seems as though he is headed toward total self-destruction, but he is saved, in a sense, by Singer's suicide. With Singer gone, Jake finds no easy retreat into his dream world, and he leaves the town with at least some hope within him, though it is doubtful whether he fully understands what has been happening to him.

Jake's process of self-withdrawal is duplicated, with some exceptions, by Dr. Copeland, who has also experienced frustration in attempted communication of his "message" to his people. Even about his own family he thinks that he "had talked so much in the years before to his children and they had understood so little that now there was nothing at all to say." (71) He tries to better his race and feels that he has the "real true purpose" and has been selected to teach his people. Thus, like Jake, he feels he is somehow apart from the masses, that he has something to give them; and like Jake, too, his development is away from his people, away from the objective world of society and into his own mind. Copeland differs from Blount, however, because he does seem more sincere in his attempts at communication early in the novel. He seems to be nearly successful when he gets the full attention of the Negroes attending his annual essay-award party; the group becomes caught up in the doctor's words and applauds when he finishes. But even Copeland wonders whether these people really understand since at one point they interrupt his speech with cries (quite contradictory to the Marxist message) of "Save us!" and "Hallelujah! Save us, Lord!" (165) The whole speech seems doubly futile since Dr. Copeland is very ill and there is no one to take his place as teacher except Lancy Davis, who is killed at the carnival riot. So

Copeland comes to Singer and speaks of his efforts to encourage birth control among his people. He speaks, too, of the pride he feels for his race:

Beaten and chained and sold on the block, the least of these strong ones perished again. And finally through the bitter years the strongest of my people are still here. Their sons and daughters, their grandsons and great grandsons.  
(119)

And, as with Jake, the irony in Copeland's message grows. It is ironic first that he comes to Singer with this message, and also because of the vast dichotomy between his race as he describes it, made strong through the ordeals it has had to survive, and his race as he sees it in the real world--a race beaten and trod upon, seeking supplication and failing to comprehend his message. The conflict between his illusions and the realities is too great, it seems, and in his weakened condition, frustrated with his life, he too retreats further into a dream world and comes to Singer, who he feels has the knowledge of "a race oppressed." But Singer, of course, has no more understanding of Copeland's real, true purpose than he had of Jake Blount's Marxist theories. Singer's only comment in his letter to Antonapoulos is that "this black man frightens me sometimes. His eyes are hot and bright."  
(183)

The irony of Copeland's position reaches a climax in the last part of the novel when, a sick and defeated



man, as trod upon as the rest of his race, he echoes precisely the stubborn inability to act which he had fought against in his people. His daughter tries to get him to leave the house for his final ride to the family farm, but he "will not be hurried." He says, "Just let me be. Kindly allow me to sit here in peace a moment." (281) As he continues to rock himself in his chair and stare around him at his empty quarters, the symbolic value of the house once again, as with Mick, becomes evident. Dr. Copeland's dream world is indeed empty now, his dreams shattered. And if his defeat seems harsher and more final than Jake's, if this final scene does represent the end for Copeland with no suggestion of another beginning, at the same time the Negro doctor at least briefly makes an effort to come to grips with what has happened to him. He seems to realize once, clearly, something of his shortcomings: "I have done those things which I ought not to have done," he thinks, "and left undone those things which I ought to have done. So this cannot truly be the end." (282) It is the end, the reader senses, despite Copeland's assertion that he will return soon, and despite the fact that he still feels a glimmer of the old fire within himself. Though he wishes to speak aloud as he is bounced about in the wagon leaving town, he is unable to find the strength to raise himself, and he realizes that "there was no one to hear him." (287)

Though Copeland seems to realize his failure at the end of the novel, he does not achieve a full understanding any more than Jake of just what has happened to him and just why he has not been successful. He fails to realize that, like Jake, he really gave up any attempt at true communication long before. Even at the very end, Copeland still thinks back on Singer as the "white man who was not insolent or scornful but who was just" and on Jake Blount, the man with whom he had the most in common and the most to talk about, with hatred and "murderous darkness." (284) But with an understanding of the basic conflict of objective and subjective worlds, the reader realizes that both men delude themselves. Their words are meant not for anyone but themselves. They seek out Singer because he gives them the pretense upon which they can build their own dream worlds.

The terms "object" and "subject" may help to explain something of the nature of the lack of communication and concomitant isolation evident in these characters. When they create their private, subjective worlds, they are illustrating only a selfish awareness of themselves as subjects. Mick does this early in the book; she feels herself at the center of their world, and she admits no one else (save Singer) to this dream world. Were Jake and Dr. Copeland interested in true communication, they would treat those others around them as subjects too;

they would show compassion and love and assume that others were plagued with similar frustrations and hurts and hopes. But these would-be social reformers display no real compassion. True, Jake is appalled at the misery and hardships he finds in the mill town, and Copeland is obviously upset at the conditions of his people; but neither one shows the sympathy one would expect. Both take these injustices to be some sort of affront to their own sensibilities--as a personal insult to their own ideas of reform. Both are so locked within their little subjective worlds that they treat others as mere objects to be directed about rather than as feeling, thinking, and suffering people like themselves. Thus Dr. Copeland, who pretends to seek deliverance in this world for his people, cannot even get along with members of his own family because they have refused to fit into the pattern he would have them follow. Jake, when laughed at by men to whom he is trying to preach the message of Marxist economics, also becomes personally insulted and adopts an attitude at least as antagonistic as those mill owners whom he derides. He angrily retorts to the mill hands, "Laugh--that's all you're good for. I hope you sit there and snicker 'til you rot!" (57)

In a very real way, what both Jake and Dr. Copeland do is make gods of themselves within the cells of their own minds. Unable to meet the challenge of the everyday



world as Mick at least partially does, they try to fulfill their ideals within a self-manufactured world of illusion. From this inner world they bar most human emotion, and they find security through the self-supporting fabric of their economic and social theories. It is a comfortable world in which all the answers seem obvious, all the problems solvable; but it is a false world that is doomed, for both men are ultimately unable to escape reality. Despite the jealousy with which they guard their respective worlds from each other and despite the eagerness with which they cling to Singer as a means of continuing their illusions, they are no more able to maintain their inner worlds than is Mick. In the final analysis they become gods of nothing at all. This is what both men, in the end, fail to comprehend. Even though their private worlds are destroyed, they still refuse to confront squarely their positions in the everyday world. At the end of the novel, Jake leaves and is described as having "hope in him, and soon perhaps the outline of his journey would take form." (299) But as with Dr. Copeland, the reader doubts if Jake can ever be successful in fulfilling his social theories for he is not really interested in that sort of fulfillment. At best he will only succeed in creating a temporary structure in which he can shelter himself once again.

The overwhelming tragedy and irony surrounding

these two characters has not been fully appreciated. There is a tendency to see Jake Blount and Dr. Copeland (because of the accuracy of the evils each sees in society and because of the obvious need for some of the solutions they seem to advocate) as being well-intentioned men who are simply unable, due to the general inertia of society, to carry out their plans. Their tragedy, however, lies not with the failure in this sense but in their self-deception. The additional irony of their position is that though they see so much of what is wrong in society, they are unable to see the falseness of their own lives. They are incapable of perceiving that they themselves duplicate, in a personal way, much of the selfishness and lack of compassion they decry in society. In connection with this, I am reminded of a puzzling description of The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter offered by Mrs. McCullers herself. She describes her book as "an ironic parable of fascism . . . presenting the spiritual rather than the political side of the phenomenon."<sup>1</sup> Most critics refer to this description either not at all or as making little sense. Chester Eisinger states, "The comment makes sense only if we assume that the economics of capitalism and the racial practices of the South

---

<sup>1</sup>As quoted by Oliver Evans, The Ballad of Carson McCullers: A Biography (New York, 1966), p. 43.

suggest to her the barbarism of fascism."<sup>2</sup> Oliver Evans, in an apparent attempt to clear up the question, suggests that although

. . . this description of the novel is indeed misleading in the sense that it limits the real subject too narrowly, it is possible if we think of Singer and Antonapoulos as leaders, blindly invested by others with attributes in which they are only too conspicuously (for those whom they fail to hypnotize) lacking, for us to see the terrifying meaning of the parable: in this absurdly grim game of follow-the-leader, the ultimate leader, the power beyond the power, is a lunatic.<sup>3</sup>

I suggest that Mrs. McCullers' description is particularly apt and not nearly as limiting as even Mr. Evans seems to think, for he insists on associating the idea of fascism with leadership. Mrs. McCullers, however, is very careful in her phrasing; it is spiritual fascism which she treats in her novel, and it is precisely this sort of fascism of the mind and heart that is illustrated by both Jake Blount and Dr. Copeland and, as we shall discuss later, John Singer. These characters do indeed make gods of themselves in their own minds. They set themselves and their dreams and plans and solutions above human understanding. They subordinate all others to their own worlds of illusions. Mrs. McCullers' novel

---

<sup>2</sup>Chester E. Eisinger, "Carson McCullers and the Failure of Dialogue," in Fiction of the Forties (Chicago, 1963), p. 251.

<sup>3</sup>Evans, loc. cit.



is a parable of this sort of spiritual fascism, and that this parable is profoundly ironic is more than obvious. If there is any end to the long string of ironic paradoxes surrounding Blount and Copeland, it is suggested by Mrs. McCullers' own description. These two social activists who unleash a cry for justice and equality, who carry the banner of Marxist reform of the system, are themselves the bearers of a type of personal fascism that destroys the human spirit, and they, finally, are their own victims. This spiritual fascism seems far removed from the usual, political denotation of the word, and certainly Mrs. McCullers uses the term in a very special sense. The fascism of which she speaks is a dictatorship of the mind in which the individual sets himself up as his own god, his own savior. The result of such spiritual fascism is precisely the sort of riot which takes place at the carnival. When the fight breaks out, it is "every man for himself." (287) Jake Blount joins this fight and feels "that he had let loose a wild, hard rhythm in him." (288) As Jake participates in the riot, the word "Christ" keeps turning in his mind. He does see himself as a savior, as his own god. It is each man setting himself up in this way, being "every man for himself," that ultimately leads to hatred and violence.

#### CHAPTER IV

##### SINGER AND ANTONAPOULOS AS GOD-FIGURES

Blount and Copeland create inner worlds in which they are their own god-figures, and this process is duplicated by Singer and Antonapoulos' one-sided relationship. Both characters are deaf mutes and may be drawn together by their similar conditions, but for Singer there is another reason. Through sign language he says much to his friend but gets no reciprocal attention and no indication of understanding:

At home Singer was always talking to Antonapoulos. . . . With his thin, strong hands he told Antonapoulos all that had happened during the day.

Antonapoulos sat back lazily and looked at Singer. It was seldom that he ever moved his hands to speak at all--and then it was to say that he wanted to eat or sleep or to drink. . . . Singer never knew just how much his friend understood of all the things he told him. But it did not matter. (2)

Just as Blount and Copeland seek out the one person who, through his handicap, cannot fully understand or reply, so too does Singer. Antonapoulos has the additional disability of a moronic level of intelligence, and thus, despite Singer's efforts, there seems to be as little real communication between the two mutes as between the

two social activists. The most striking aspect of this relationship is not merely that the two--the one obviously intelligent, compassionate, and gentlemanly; the other an uncaring freak--are attracted to one another, but that it is Singer who needs Antonapoulos rather than the other way around. This is exhibited later in the book as Singer goes out of his way to visit Antonapoulos at the asylum while the Greek cares more about the presents Singer may bring rather than about seeing his friend.

Antonapoulos, in fact, does not even seem to care for Singer at all. Their friendship is no more reciprocal than their "conversations," and it does not need to be. Antonapoulos pays little attention to Singer, and Singer in turn needs no response from Antonapoulos. The relationship is illustrated when the two play chess, Singer's favorite game. By careful reinforcing, Singer teaches his friend a few moves, though "the Greek never got on to the erratic movements of the knights and the sweeping mobility of the queens." (3) After the first moves, Singer plays the game himself, moving both white and black pieces while Antonapoulos watches. It is not necessary that Singer have a real opponent; he can play the game as long as he is seated opposite the Greek, who is able by his presence to fill the role of contestant in Singer's mind. This same phenomenon is evident in other aspects of their relationship. When Singer visits the asylum, he talks



feverishly and is described as being in a state of near-ecstasy:

It seemed to Singer that years had passed since they had been together. There was so much to say that his hands could not shape the signs with speed enough. His green eyes burned and sweat glittered on his forehead. The old feeling of gaiety and bliss was so quick in him again that he could not control himself. (80)

His eagerness in talking to his uninterested friend is illustrated by Singer's desperate effort to say everything possible before he has to leave. He is described as talking "desperately and with his narrow face . . . very pale." (81) All the time, however, Antonapoulos understands little or nothing of Singer's speech, which must seem to the Greek as garbled as Blount's and Copeland's monologues seem to Singer.

One aspect of Singer's situation which deserves closer attention than it has generally been given is that his dependence on his friend does not derive from Antonapoulos' sharing of the same physical handicap. Singer cannot accurately be pictured as a man isolated by his handicap, frustrated by his inability to achieve communication with others and thus striving to pour out his feelings to the only person who can understand his sign language. At the same time he cannot, as Oliver Evans suggests, be pictured as a lover in any usual sense, and he does not make "the gift of love"

to Antonapoulos.<sup>1</sup> Though one could speculate whether Singer's current isolation derives from some sort of frustrated efforts to reach beyond himself at some time in the past, at least within the time-span of the novel it is evident that Singer cares even less about real communication than do Blount and Copeland. This point is emphasized in the book, for the reader is told that Singer has actually succeeded in teaching himself how to speak verbally. Because he finds this manner of speech awkward and senses that he sounds strange, he is not satisfied; and after he meets Antonapoulos he never speaks this way again "because with his friend there was no need for this." (8) Singer, then, makes a conscious choice not to communicate in the everyday world, and his attachment to his friend cannot be explained in terms of communication at all. Antonapoulos' appeal is, rather, precisely his ignorance and "nothingness." Because Antonapoulos does not speak and projects no fully formed identity aside from his own selfishness, Singer is free to make of him what he wishes, just as Blount and Copeland do with Singer.

The fact that the need for communication is not really the driving force behind Singer's actions is further emphasized late in the novel. After Singer learns of his

---

<sup>1</sup>Oliver Evans, The Ballad of Carson McCullers: A Biography (New York, 1966), p. 45.

friend's death in the asylum, he wanders aimlessly around the town. He feels very lonely. Suddenly he happens upon three mutes in a poolroom. He goes up to them and offers a sign of greeting; they respond enthusiastically, but after telling his name and where he is from

. . . he could think of nothing else to tell about himself. He asked if they knew Spiros Antonapoulos. They did not know him. Singer stood with his hands dangling loose. His head was still inclined to one side and his glance was oblique. He was so listless and cold that the three mutes in the bowler hats looked at him queerly. After a while they left him out of their conversation. And when they had paid for the rounds of beers and were ready to depart they did not suggest that he join them. (279)

Singer's dangling hands at this moment of possible communication with those who could provide understanding and compassion indicate not only that he seeks no communication but also that he needs none of the "understanding" the mutes might offer. They do not share his real handicap, for Singer's sickness is in his mind and derives from the subjective world in which he seeks to escape reality. He uses Antonapoulos as an object through which he can carry on his imaginary life, and with Antonapoulos' death Singer's inner world is also destroyed. With his friend alive, Singer can "surrender himself wholly to thoughts of his friend" and achieve a "submerged communion," (276) a sense of self-fulfillment; but with knowledge of his friend's death, he can no longer achieve this subjective bliss.



This final emptiness is too much for the mute to bear.

Singer earlier in the novel seems more completely entrenched in his dream world than do either Blount or Copeland, and this may explain why he ends his life while the other two characters are merely severely shaken by the collapse of their inner worlds. In any event, all three dream worlds are destroyed during the course of the story, and a fourth, Mick's, is left irrevocably behind. One character, however, succeeds in maintaining an inner world right to the moment of his death, and that is Antonapoulos. Limited not only by speech and hearing deficiencies but also by a childish level of intelligence, he is able in all innocence to preserve the world of a child, a world similar to that which Mick must leave behind as she is initiated into the everyday world. He, of all the characters, is able to achieve this world with no pretending, with no dependence upon any other figure. It is, presumably, this self-sufficiency, together with Antonapoulos' position as the final link in a series of dependencies, that leads Frank Durham and Oliver Evans to conclude that the Greek is the structural center of the novel.<sup>2</sup> But Antonapoulos really represents the subjective world delineated so much more fully through Mick Kelly's

---

<sup>2</sup>Frank Durham, "God and No God in The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter," South Atlantic Quarterly, LVI (Autumn 1957); Evans, p. 40.

story, and though he may be the supporting element for the positions of Singer and thus also Blount and Copeland, his death is far removed from Mick herself (whose initiation is only superficially linked to Singer) and Biff Brannon (whose non-participant position is discussed in the next chapter).

The Greek's importance, however, has been claimed for reasons other than structure, for some critics have seen in him a god-figure. The passage upon which such interpretations are based describes a dream in which Singer finds himself kneeling on stone steps looking upward at Antonapoulos, who is naked and holds aloft some object to which he seems to pray. Behind Singer, farther down the steps, are the four other major characters; and behind them, crowds of people. This passage, both revealing and ambiguous, has too often been evaluated out of context. It is necessary to keep in mind that this is Singer's dream and no one else's. Perhaps he may subconsciously betray an awareness of his own dependence on Antonapoulos, and perhaps he also sees himself, as Frank Durham suggests, as a Christ figure kneeling before God; but this is only his vision and cannot necessarily be taken as the author's assessment of the relative positions of the characters. It is true, I think, that Singer himself is in a god-like position. So is Antonapoulos and so too are Blount, Copeland, Mick (before her initiation), and even, at

times, Biff Brannon. This is, indeed, Mrs. McCullers' vision: as we have noticed with Blount and Copeland and as we see also in Singer and Antonapoulos, these characters opt for an inner world of illusion in which they set themselves up as gods; that is their tragedy. The recognition of these multiple gods in the novel explains the confusion of religious symbols--a complication that is something of an obstacle for Mr. Durham's line of interpretation. Singer is not the only Christ figure. Jake Blount, for one, complete with stigmata, sees himself in his dream world as filling a sacrificial role, and so does Dr. Copeland. Brannon too is described as adopting Christ-like poses; for example, when he lies in bed early in the novel and "stretched both of his arms outward crossed his naked feet." (27)

Mrs. McCullers has not provided these religious references in order to confuse the reader but rather to emphasize the central pattern that lies behind all the major characters, actions, and themes of the novel. The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter can be interpreted as a religious allegory perhaps, as Mr. Durham suggests, or as a tragic representation of isolation in contemporary society, or as the story of an adolescent's brutal initiation into the adult world, or as, in Mrs. McCullers' words, a parable of spiritual fascism. The wonder is not that the book can be viewed in such very different ways but that these



different aspects are all unified so thoroughly. All of these subjects spring from the same basic pattern of objective and subjective worlds, and each of these various aspects of the novel succeeds in commenting on and reinforcing the others. The god-like qualities of Jake Blount, for example, are integrally related with his inner dream world and attempts at self-fulfillment as defined by Mick Kelly and in a lesser way by Antonapoulos; and both these aspects together make up precisely Mrs. McCullers' notion of "spiritual fascism," which is in turn the root problem behind the isolation apparent in her novels. In such a manner, the inter-relationships of the different elements of her fictional world can be traced and the genius of her craft fully appreciated. A novel that so many critics have found confusing and ambiguous, which Klaus Lubbers refers to as Mrs. McCullers' "most puzzling,"<sup>3</sup> which Ihab Hassan describes as retaining "a certain ambiguity, a kind of elusiveness, which the form is incapable of bringing to account,"<sup>4</sup> emerges as finely structured, infinitely rich in texture, and thoroughly unified by the consistency

---

<sup>3</sup>Klaus Lubbers, "The Necessary Order: A Study of Theme and Structure in Carson McCullers' Fiction," Jahrbuch für Amerikastudien, VIII (1963), 188.

<sup>4</sup>Ihab Hassan, "Carson McCullers: The Aesthetics of Love and Pain," in Radical Innocence: Studies in the Contemporary American Novel (Princeton, 1961), p. 215.

of Mrs. McCullers' vision of inner and outer worlds.

In this sense the various Christ-figures serve an important function in the novel; but the attempt at deriving a detailed allegorical structure for these references is not profitable, I think, for Mrs. McCullers' purpose is to underscore the more important central conflict of subjective and objective worlds rather than to introduce a religious sub-theme. Seen in this way, the relationship between Antonapoulos and Singer is consistent with other characterizations. Singer is not a Christ-figure in the usual sense, though he sees himself in a sacrificial role. He is a divinity within his own world, and he uses his friend to achieve this end. Thus, though Singer pictures himself in his dream as worshipping Antonapoulos, this dream itself is an example of his self-delusion, for Singer, in the final analysis, worships himself. Antonapoulos is a self-worshipper, too, but the reader feels no sense of tragedy about Antonapoulos since he never really deceives himself and does not have to suffer through the loss of his inner world. Singer does suffer, however, and his tragic end is born from his self-delusion.

## CHAPTER V

### BIFF BRANNON, QUESTIONER

An additional unifying element in the fabric of the novel is Biff Brannon. Mick Kelly is at the center of the novel (in the sense that her story is central to an understanding of the other characters), and yet she is apart from the inter-relationships among Singer, Copeland, and Blount and between Singer and Antonapoulos. Brannon too is aloof from the others. It is Biff, the quiet, ambisexual owner of the New York Café, who watches the changing characters as they pass through his establishment; and if Mick is the actor who moves through various stages of development which illustrate the conflicts and needs of the other characters, then it is Biff who takes it all in and finally reaches some sort of partial understanding of just what is happening. He alone seems to be both uninvolved enough to see and question and also involved sufficiently to understand in a personal way the plight of the other characters. Biff more than any other character is able to maintain the fragile balance between worlds that Mick experiences only fleetingly that night after her party.

Biff, like Singer, is silent. He is really more silent than the deaf mute, for Singer at least can pretend



to unburden himself to Antonapoulos while Brannon confides in no one. Even with his wife he thinks, "With her, silence was better. Being around that woman always made him different from his real self." (11) In his silence, Biff puzzles over the various characters who appear, at times like a rogues' gallery, before his counter. Early in the novel he listens as Blount pours out a steady torrent of words, and Brannon thinks quietly to himself that "this man had a good mind, all right, but he went from one thing to another without any reason behind it at all. He is a man thrown off his track by something." (13) He realizes almost at once that there is something abnormal about Blount, not physically but "in the mind," and he finds himself helping this stranger. Brannon indeed is used to helping people in need, and it seems it is precisely the abnormality that attracts him. As he thinks to himself:

. . . he did like freaks. He had a special friendly feeling for sick people and cripples. Whenever somebody with a harelip or T.B. came into the place he would set him up to beer. Or if the customer were a hunchback or a bad cripple, then it would be whiskey on the house. There was one fellow who had had his peter and his left leg blown off in a boiler explosion, and whenever he came to town there was a free pint waiting for him. And if Singer were a drinking kind of man he could get liquor at half price at any time he wanted it. (18)

The obvious implication is that Biff helps others whose deficiencies somehow reflect his own. Thus, silent like Singer, he is attracted to the mute; mentally somewhat abnormal, he

seeks to help Blount; sexually ambivalent, he would help the castrated man and, likewise, finds himself attracted to the adolescent, tomboyish Mick Kelly, who is herself not yet a woman and yet not a boy. (This latter attraction becomes so strong at one point in the novel that Biff actually begins following Mick around, just as Mick takes to following Singer.)

To the extent that Biff Brannon identifies with those who reflect his own character flaws, he attempts some sort of self-fulfillment, enough to let him share something of the experience central to the other major characters; and yet he is able to keep from being drawn into any one self-fulfilling, self-consuming relationship. He is further removed from the others because his personality includes the element of true compassion lacking so obviously in some of the other characters. As a result he remains as much the spectator as the participant. He witnesses, for example, but does not really participate in Blount's drunken efforts to talk to Singer that first night in the café. Others present laugh at Blount's routine, and "only Biff was serious. He wanted to ascertain if the mute really understood what was said to him." (20)

In a way this scene in the New York Café early in the novel acts as a paradigm of some of the later roles. Mick appears briefly going about her business and displaying her adolescence. Blount holds forth, succeeds in imposing

on Singer's patience, and even tries to drag the reluctant Dr. Copeland into the all-white establishment. Through it all, Biff stands and wonders, as he does throughout the rest of the book. His curiosity grows. It seems that the more he watches and questions the actions of the others the more he learns about himself, and thus he is distinguished from the other characters because he seeks not self-fulfillment but rather self-knowledge. To gain this insight (though he does not realize his own motive), he keenly observes the present, records the past (he files and saves newspapers), and tries to answer the crucial question "why?" His questioning of others leads him to question himself, as illustrated by the following sequence. He thinks at one point that

. . . in nearly every person there was some physical part kept always guarded. With the mute his hands. The kid Mick picked at the front of her blouse to keep the cloth from rubbing the new, tender nipples beginning to come out on her breast. With Alice it was her hair . . . . And with himself? (23-24)

These physical aspects, of course, correlate with those tender spots in each character's personality: Mick's adolescence, for example, and Singer's means of self-fulfillment through Antonapoulos. And so Brannon questions himself, but he finds no ready answers and remains, even as he does to the end of the novel, puzzled. Indeed, his vulnerability seems to be nothing so much physically



revealed but rather precisely that force within him that leads him to these very questions. He is--perhaps this is his curse--plagued by a strange curiosity that compels him to seek an understanding of whatever it is that lies at the very heart of human nature itself.

Brannon, as an observer, functions as a literary device as well as a participating character, and the deftness with which the author handles this character reveals much of her skill. The temptation must have been great for Mrs. McCullers to put not only the questions but also the answers in the mind of the café owner--to use him to "explain" the book and clear up the apparent ambiguities. To do so, of course, would limit the potentials of her fictional form and also destroy the credibility of the character, and the author avoided this. Brannon does serve, however, to focus the reader on the critical questions about the book and also very subtly to suggest some of the basic elements and thematic structures which unify the characters. One example occurs again early in the novel. When Jake and Singer leave the café after Jake's furious drunk, Biff looks after them and then up at the sky, and "the vast depth of it oppressed him." (24) The strangeness of what he sees leads him to try "to explain something to himself," and later, as he lies in bed, he puzzles over Blount's actions that night. Significantly, he sees Blount in Christ-like terms:

In some men it is in them to give up everything personal at some time, before it ferments and poisons--throw it to some human being or some human idea. They have to. In some men it is in them--The text is 'All men seek for Thee.' Maybe that was why--maybe . . . . (27)

Whether the reader agrees entirely with Biff's characterization of Blount in religious terms, this train of thought obviously serves to focus attention precisely on Blount as a god-figure, the importance of which we have already discussed. Brannon reaches no pat conclusions, but as he mulls over characters and events, he serves the reader by underscoring key points. In this particular scene, as if for further emphasis, Brannon himself adopts a Christ-like pose, as though he is trying out Blount's role in his own mind.

Later in the novel Brannon becomes even more questioning and thus more significant as a device. After his wife's death he reacts analytically with a series of questions, and such questions together with repetition of the word "why" become more frequent in the last chapters. Moments after Alice's death, while Biff is alone with her, he thinks:

Why? Why was it that in cases of real love the one who is left does not more often follow the beloved by suicide? Only because the living must bury the dead? Because of the measured rites that must be fulfilled after a death? Because it is as though the one who is left steps for a time upon a stage and each second swells to an unlimited amount of time and he is watched

by many eyes? Because there is a function he must carry out? Or perhaps, when there is love, the widowed must stay for the resurrection of the beloved--so that the one who has gone is not really dead, but grows and is created for a second time in the soul of the living? Why?  
(104)

This passage is fairly oblique, as the author intends, but it does at least serve to suggest an inter-relationship between god-images ("the resurrection") and the one-sidedness of the relationships among characters. Whether Biff himself is aware of it, a central problem of the book is being posed through his thoughts. The idea of a "loved one" after death being recreated in the lover's own mind or soul emphasizes precisely man's ability to fill his own needs, make up for his own deficiencies, by creating his own inner world.

Yet a third example of the author's technique is illustrated as Brannon adopts again his familiar pose behind his counter. Blount and Mick and Singer talk before him, and Biff thinks:

Blount and Mick both kept their eyes on Singer. They talked, and the mute's expression changed as he watched them. It was a funny thing. The reason--was it in them or in him [Singer]? He sat very still with his hands in his pockets, and because he did not speak it made him seem superior. What did that fellow think and realize? What did he know? (114)

Biff wonders, without putting his finger on the answer, why these characters try to talk with the deaf mute. "Was it in them or in him?" he puzzles, and indeed this is a basic



question. Put in the terms we have been using, the question is: Are the characters attracted to Singer because of anything in him, something they seek to tap through true communication, some special knowledge? Or is the mystique about Singer something each character creates within his own mind, for his own selfish purposes, for his own self-fulfillment? Biff never fully understands the answer, but the author succeeds in using him to raise the question in the reader's mind.

I think that Biff Brannon's function as a literary device has not been fully appreciated. If Mick Kelly is at the center of the novel in terms of the reader's understanding, then it is Biff who frames the action and the characters within the proper set of questions. He acts as something of a camera lens, first focusing the reader on one aspect of the novel and then another. Throughout it all, the reader is not quite aware that he is being positioned in this way. We take Biff for what he is on the surface--just another of the characters attracted to Singer. We sympathize with him as a character; we follow his trial excursions into the inner world as he attaches himself briefly to Singer, Mick, and Blount (whom he actually pictures as an Inca Indian in a dream), and we are snapped back to reality with him. We feel for his position as it is described:

Between the two worlds he was suspended. He saw that he was looking at his own face in the counter glass before him. Sweat glistened on his temples and his face was contorted. One eye was opened wider than the other. The left eye delved narrowly into the past while the right gazed wide and affrighted into a future of blackness, error, and ruin. And he was suspended between radiance and darkness. Between bitter irony and faith. (306)

Yet at the end of the book as Biff resigns "himself to await the morning sun," we find ourselves turning back to precisely those questions he raises so unobtrusively, and we seek just those answers Biff does not voice. The novel need not be obscure, for these questions point the way to an interpretation that recognizes the embracing unity behind Mrs. McCullers' fictional world.

Biff's position at the end of the book has been commented on frequently, and some critics have seen his final questioning and his unanswered call for help as an indication of pessimism on the part of the author. But it is precisely his questioning, so important for the framing of the novel, that also makes Biff a very positive character. At the end of the book, Singer thinks, "But, motherogod, was he a sensible man . . . ? And would he just stand here like a jittery ninny or would he pull himself together and be reasonable?" (306) The question is answered by Biff's actions. He tends to everyday concerns; he goes outside to raise the awning, and "as he went to the door his walk gained steadiness." (307)

Biff succeeds in composing himself despite the fact that he, more than any other character, has witnessed the full panorama of the human struggle. Even though, like Mick, he does not understand what has happened, he still looks forward to the "morning sun."



## CHAPTER VI

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This discussion has hinged on Mick's central position to any complete understanding of the novel, for it is through her story, together with Biff Brannon's focusing of the reader's attention, that the fundamental conflict of subjective and objective worlds is delineated. This division has been recognized, and Klaus Lubbers, for one, has seen the error of some of the previous criticism; he discards the notion of isolation as the central theme and posits that the basic conflict is between illusion and reality. His essay opens new areas of interpretation and will prove very valuable to students of Mrs. McCullers' fiction, but he does not fully explore the implications of this basic conflict as a unifying element through all aspects of The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter, and he does not seem to appreciate fully how carefully Mrs. McCullers herself spells out, in fictional terms, precisely this conflict through Mick's progression from subjective to objective world.

In this paper I have approached the novel on the author's own terms, through the division she establishes in Mick's story, and have traced this division through the major characters. That in this process of analysis answers

to some important critical questions have been suggested only indicates the importance of the basic division the author assigns to her fictional world. This division is reflected through Blount's and Copeland's efforts at self-fulfillment in their own inner worlds. These characters are thus revealed as not seeking communication but instead some illusory dream world, and they are unable to understand the depth of their own self-deception. Likewise, Singer--a character viewed sympathetically by many critics as a frustrated lover, as the Christ-figure center of the novel, as the only selfless character in the book--is revealed in truth as possessing precisely the same selfishness and achieving the same self-deception as Blount and Copeland. Antonapoulos alone is able to "get away with" maintaining his inner world, for he is the only character who remains in child-like innocence and ignorance. The core of relationships among Singer, Antonapoulos, Blount, and Copeland is further commented upon by the author through the use of Biff Brannon as both a questioning observer and also a participating character.

Through an analysis of these characters laid over/ against the basic division of subjective and objective worlds, an explanation can be reached for both the multiplicity of religious symbols and Mrs. McCullers' puzzling description of her book as an ironic parable of fascism. Each character is his own god in his efforts at self-fulfillment

and this indeed is a totalitarianism of the spirit. As a result these characters who live in their own inner worlds are, regardless of their protestations to the contrary, for the most part calloused and unfeeling toward the very human needs of others.



# BIBLIOGRAPHY

- McClure, Frank. "Plots in Dixie." *The Atlantic Review*.  
XVI (1938). 151-57.
  - McClure, Frederick I. "The Allegory in American  
Fiction." *The Atlantic Review*. XVI (September 1937).  
113-19.
  - McClure, Frederick I. "The Development of Theme Through Symbol  
in the Novels of Carson McCullers." *The Atlantic Review*.  
XVII (Summer 1939). 205-213.
  - McClure, Frank. "God and No God in The Heart Is a Lonely  
Hunter." *South Atlantic Quarterly*. XVI (Autumn 1937).  
138-42.
  - McClure, Charles E. "Carson McCullers and the Failure  
of Dialogue." in *Flights of the Imagination*. Chicago:  
University of Chicago Press, 1961. pp. 243-51.
  - McClure, Oliver. *The World of Carson McCullers: A Study*.  
New York: Coward-
- ## BIBLIOGRAPHY
- McClure, Oliver. "The Case of the Silent Singer: A Reevaluation of  
The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter." *The Atlantic Review*. XII  
(Summer 1935). 185-201.
  - McClure, Oliver. "Spiritual Isolation in Carson McCullers." *The  
World Review*. I (April 1938). 297-313.
  - McClure, Barbara K. "The Red Sweet Music of Carson McCullers." *The  
Atlantic Review*. XVI (Summer 1938). 202-207.
  - McClure, Louise I. "Disappointed Love: Carson McCullers."  
in *Violence in Recent American Fiction*. Durham, North  
Carolina: Duke University Press, 1967. pp. 159-77.
  - McClure, Jane. "Carson McCullers, Pilgrim of Loneliness." *The  
Atlantic Review*. XI (1937). 53-58.
  - McClure, Herb. "Carson McCullers: The Aesthetics of Love  
and Pain." in *Radical Imagination: Studies in the  
Literary American Novel*. Princeton: Princeton  
University Press, 1961. pp. 205-229.
  - McClure, Gayton. "Carson McCullers: Variations on a Theme." *The  
College English*. XIII (October 1931). 1-8. (Same  
article published in *The English Journal*. XI [October  
1931]. 415-22.)

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Baldanza, Frank. "Plato in Dixie," The Georgia Review, XII (1958), 151-67.
- Carpenter, Frederick I. "The Adolescent in American Fiction," The English Journal, XLVI (September 1957), 313-19.
- Dodd, Wayne D. "The Development of Theme Through Symbol in the Novels of Carson McCullers," The Georgia Review, XVII (Summer 1963), 206-213.
- Durham, Frank. "God and No God in The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter," South Atlantic Quarterly, LVI (Autumn 1957), 494-99.
- Eisinger, Chester E. "Carson McCullers and the Failure of Dialogue," in Fiction of the Forties. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963, pp. 243-58.
- Evans, Oliver. The Ballad of Carson McCullers: A Biography. New York: Coward-McCann, 1966.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Case of the Silent Singer: A Revaluation of The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter," The Georgia Review, XIX (Summer 1965), 188-203.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Spiritual Isolation in Carson McCullers," New World Writing, I (April 1952), 297-310.
- Folk, Barbara M. "The Sad Sweet Music of Carson McCullers," The Georgia Review, XVI (Summer 1962), 202-209.
- Gossett, Louise Y. "Dispossessed Love: Carson McCullers," in Violence in Recent Southern Fiction. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1965, pp. 159-77.
- Hart, Jane. "Carson McCullers, Pilgrim of Loneliness," The Georgia Review, XI (1957), 53-58.
- Hassan, Ihab. "Carson McCullers: The Aesthetics of Love and Pain," in Radical Innocence: Studies in the Contemporary American Novel. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961, pp. 205-229.
- Kohler, Dayton. "Carson McCullers: Variations on a Theme," College English, XIII (October 1951), 1-8. (Same article published in The English Journal, XL [October 1951], 415-22.)

- Lubbers, Klaus. "The Necessary Order: A Study of Theme and Structure in Carson McCullers' Fiction," Jahrbuch für Amerikastudien, VIII (1963), 187-204.
- McCullers, Carson. The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter. New York: Bantam Books, 1961.
- McPherson, Hugo. "Carson McCullers: Lonely Huntress," Tamarack Review, No. 11 (Spring 1959), 28-40.
- Malin, Irving. New American Gothic. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1962, pp. 19-26, 54-59, 83-86, 111-17, 133-39.
- Moore, Jack B. "Carson McCullers: The Heart Is a Timeless Hunter," Twentieth Century Literature, XI (July 1965), 76-81.
- Taylor, Horace. "The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter: A Southern Waste Land," Studies in American Literature, edited by Waldo McNeir and Leo B. Levy. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1960, pp. 154-60.
- Vickery, John G. "Carson McCullers: A Map of Love," Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature, I (1960), 13-24.